

Response to Walter Sawatsky's "Elusive Road to Mutuality in Global Mennonite Mission"

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I feel a great privilege to respond to Walter's paper on the issue of mutuality in mission. This is the second time I am being called to respond to his idea paper. The first time was several years ago for a consultation on revisiting the Anabaptist Mennonite History from a perspective beyond North America and Europe. The result of that consultation was what we now call the Global Anabaptist History Project. First it was history and now missiology but the same person presenting an idea paper. Walter I think our marriage is sealed!

I would also like to mention right from the onset that I might be a cousin to missiologists, theologians, and historians but I am not any of them by profession. Therefore, my response is influenced by my public and community health perspective where the issues of accountability, mutuality, and interdependence are always high on our agenda. On a personal and practical level, after visiting so many Anabaptist related churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America during the past three years, I found this subject to be of great interest for several reasons:

I hear time and time again that our old paradigms of doing mission must change and we need new ways of relating to each other.

1. We have not dealt very well with the legacy of our old paradigm of relating to each other. The idea of no longer aliens and foreigners to each other has been spoken about but not believed or practiced in real life.
2. The essence of Anabaptist beliefs and practices is assumed but not a reality in many churches around the world, including in North America and Europe.
3. There is no guarantee that the financial power base that is still in North America and in Europe will always continue to be the case in the future.
4. The vitality in church planting efforts beyond national borders is becoming a primary agenda in many Anabaptist related churches that were once satisfied to just being consumers of mission efforts from the West. These

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churches are discovering that they do have gifts they can share with the rest of the Anabaptist and non-Anabaptist world.

5. There is a certain ambiguity in North American Churches today in regard to their commitment to the mutuality process in mission through their mission agencies. I hear churches in North America as trying to find new mechanisms of relating to churches around the world in such a way that the agenda not be controlled by their own mission agencies.
6. The political agenda from North America will not make it easy for Americans to always be welcome in many parts of the world including the countries once considered friends of US.

Back to Walter's paper

I hear Walter framing the issue of mutuality in mission in term of a journey, therefore taking seriously our respective histories is an excellent starting point for a discussion on this subject. Although I will argue that we might lack recent scholarly histories of Mennonite mission from the perspective of mission activities going from North America and Europe, however, I wonder if it will be true when one takes time to study works from students finishing at theological and missiological schools in such places as in Kinshasa.

I also found Walter's comment on the use of social science as a call to a well thought through integration of other disciplines that affect the way we think and live mission. He challenges us to raise our awareness regarding the integration of social science in a way that helps us become more than just pseudo social scientists and consequently, looking for pseudo managers to run our mission activities.

On the issue of the realities of separation, I have been equally intrigued by the way we have specialized in avoiding hard questions related to mutuality and cooperation. Our beliefs and our practices do not always match. I think the bottom line is that we really don't know how to work together no matter how much we say we want to be committed to cooperation. We don't trust each other although we are trying very hard. That is why I am not surprised that John Lapp's paper did not get much attention. I think we find our loyalty to our immediate family to be stronger than to the extended family even though we find it hard to admit. I have observed

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that it is only when our resources run short that we think of ways of cooperating with others. This is even complicated on the global scene because we tend to establish relationships built on a mouse to elephant model. At the time it becomes even confusing because one does not know when one partner is an elephant when the other is a mouse.

I would suggest that if we take seriously John Lapp's paper, then missiologists meetings at this type of gathering would do better at thinking one day to organize a study conference with the goal of looking at some of these intrinsic and extrinsic factors and how they affect the way we relate to each other in mission. The study conference should be organized in collaboration with other Anabaptist related churches from around the world. I don't believe that restructuring North American mission agencies by internationalizing them is an answer. Despite our good will, the issue that always brings more frustration is about who will pay the bill. This is what shuts off all other partners. The proposal under discussion about the creation of a global mission fellowship still has not answered the question of mutual accountability just like in the past there are those who want to speak on behalf of the others. When the financial question is raised, you can hear the pin drop even in a room with a carpeted floor.

The idea of CIM playing the role of a clearing house for North American's agenda on mission is also problematic. I understand that not all North American churches are represented in CIM. How will their voices in mission be heard? How does it fit with the concept of church to church relationship?

Three comments regarding Walter's suggestions for further missiological reflection:

1. I can understand the reason for Walter focusing his suggestion on North America.
However, I also believe that mistakes made in the past are not just a one way street. If we want to correct them, we need to take a "we" approach and no longer them and us. A call for historical/missiological study must integrate input from churches in other regions of the Anabaptist family. Otherwise, it becomes "we will do our things and they will do theirs and if we meet somewhere then that is fine."
2. The use of language should not be assumed to be understood by all churches around the world. What we mean by mutuality, accountability, and interdependence has different meaning depending on where we sit – as mission administrators, a pastor in a local church sending or receiving resources or as professor of Anthropology or sociology. Paul Hiebert already gave us enough examples on that yesterday.
3. The issue of power is raised from the North American perspective also. However,

I believe it is also a critical one to other Anabaptist related churches around the world. It is my observation that we have not done well with how to deal with the question of power and authority in our churches.

A couple of questions for closing:

1. What is the role of a local congregation in relationship to mutuality, accountability, and interdependence in an era where the language of missional church has become a la mode?
2. We have done well in reaching out to the poor and the marginalized people outside North America and Europe. As a result, most of the Anabaptist related churches around the world are very poor financially and many of them have become very comfortable with support from North America. Development efforts have not alleviated most of the suffering among them. Is there any role to be played by Anabaptist missiologists because this aspect of church life has a big impact on the practice of mutuality?
3. Who should provide space for an integrated discussion to the issue of mutuality because

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it is one that permeates all aspects of church life and it goes beyond mission activities of the church?

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